



The Johnson Letter

From the desk of
Michigan State Senator

Shirley Johnson

P.O. Box 30036 Lansing, MI 48909

Toll-free at (877) SEN-13TH



The Year Past and the Future Ahead

Dear Friend:

As your voice in Lansing, my Senate colleagues and I labored tirelessly to address both the needs of Michigan workers and job providers, and the challenge of a \$1 billion-plus state budget deficit this past year.

Although the budget and sluggish economy dominated the dialogue, we also achieved a number of important goals to protect Michigan families and communities, and lay the groundwork for job creation in the new economy. I hope you will take a moment to read about some of the work we have done, as highlighted in this year-end legislative report.

We will continue to face fiscal challenges in the year ahead. We simply can not continue to spend more than we have, and raising taxes to balance the budget is not an option. With a new round of budget discussions at hand, we have some tough choices to make as we will take a good hard look at how government is spending your tax dollars. I value your input and hope you will share your budget priorities with me. Together we can find the answer to make Michigan a great place to live and work.

It is an honor and a privilege serving as your State Senator. Please be assured I will continue to work hard for you and the families of the 13th district. As always, I welcome your comments, questions and concerns, and stand ready to help should you need assistance with any state matter. Best wishes for health and happiness this year!

Sincerely,

Inside this issue:

Enriching Education

***State Still Battling
Fiscal Woes***

***Paving The Way For
Jobs***

***Keeping Communities
and Families Safe***

***New Law to Aid
Organ Donation***

***February Helpful
Hints***

Tsunami Relief Aide

Enriching Education

Improving education for Michigan's children has been a top priority for Senate Republicans. Senate Bills 1153-1157 replace the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) test for high school students with a test based on a college-entrance exam called the Michigan Merit Exam. These bills also tie the Michigan Merit Award Scholarship to the results of the new test.

The test, which would first be given to students in 2007, is a change that is supported by a broad coalition of state leaders in secondary and post-secondary education. The change is necessary because the MEAP turnaround time is too long for teachers to take advantage of results to improve student achievement.



State Still Battling Fiscal Woes

According to a national study other states, and the nation as a whole, seem to be moving in the right direction with continued growth while Michigan lags behind in economic recovery and job growth. Michigan is one of just three states that is facing a budget shortfall, according to the national study, and is also one of just three states where tax revenues are falling below projections.

On January 13, 2005 a revenue estimating conference of the House and Senate Fiscal Agencies and the State Treasurer estimated that the state's General Fund for Fiscal Year 2004-05 is facing a deficit of about \$400 million. In the coming months the Legislature will once again be working to rectify this deficit by doing what every resident and job provider has had to do in these tough times—prioritizing our budgets, then paying for only those priorities we can afford.

Paving The Way For Jobs

Senate Republicans took the lead in laying the groundwork to help create well-paying jobs. We wrapped up the JOBS I plan and charged ahead on JOBS II. Legislation to spur economic growth and create jobs:

- Offered job providers a credit to offset the Small Business Tax cost of hiring new employees and create new job opportunities.
- Eliminated red tape by making the permit and license process more efficient.
- Exempted qualified new businesses from certain taxes during their first five years of business.
- Eliminated taxation on federal and state research grants to help high-tech businesses.
- Doubled state funding to Michigan's fledgling life science industry as an investment toward attracting the jobs of the future.

Keeping Families and Communities Safe

Honest and hardworking families, which comprise the 13th district, are the backbone of our great state. To protect the well-being of our families and the places they call home in the past year we:

- Took steps to reduce and eliminate lead poisoning in Michigan.
- Created a Children's Registry to help protect kids from inappropriate e-mails and instant messages.
- Strengthened the collection process for child support from parents who have accumulated significant amounts of past due support.
- Streamlined the foster care process to help find permanent homes for children in cases of abuse and neglect.
- Created drug treatment courts to allow non-violent offenders with an addiction to drugs or alcohol to receive the help they need to become law-abiding citizens.
- Passed Kevin's Law, which allows for patient advocates and outpatient options for involuntary treatment of the mentally ill who refuse treatment before they become a danger to themselves or others.
- Restored the opportunity for grandparents to petition for visitation with grandchildren, in certain circumstances, while respecting the decisions made by a fit parent or parents.
- Protected at-risk children by increasing the power of the Children's Ombudsman's office to investigate child abuse and neglect cases.
- Increased funding for local bridge preservation and repair.
- Provided communities with new tools to help revitalize their downtowns and commerce centers.
- Authorized a reverse 911 service that would allow emergency service providers to contact residents by telephone regarding imminent danger or crisis.
- Enacted tort reform by passing legislation to preempt obesity lawsuits against the food industry.



New Law Will Aid Hundreds of Michiganians **Awaiting Organ Donations**

Legislation creating a fund to help improve Michigan's alarmingly low rate of organ donor registrations was signed into law Dec. 29 after receiving near unanimous support from the Michigan Senate and House of Representatives. Just 7 percent of Michigan residents are registered on the state's organ donor list. The national average for such lists is 40 percent. As of December 1, there were more than 2800 people waiting for donor organs in Michigan. The new law creates the "Organ and Tissue Donation Education Fund" and provides individuals the opportunity to make a financial contribution to the fund when applying for or renewing driver's licenses or state ID cards. Money in the new fund will be used to encourage Michigan residents to place their names on the organ donor registry.

Tsunami Relief Aide

In the wake of the tsunami which ravaged the Indian Subcontinent and South East Asia, several disaster relief groups have surfaced to provide assistance to those in need. However, there has also been several sham organizations that have unscrupulously used this disaster to cheat consumers.

Charities can be confirmed for legitimacy using independent verification websites such as GuideStar.org, which offers a number of useful tools for checking charities. GuideStar includes listings of those groups that have registered with and met the U.S. Internal Revenue Service's terms for a nonprofit charity. Consumers can also check with the Office of the Attorney General to verify that a charity is licensed in Michigan.

HELPFUL HINTS

The average Michigan utility customer can expect monthly natural gas bills to be \$18 to \$20 higher this winter as compared to last winter. There are several simple, low-cost actions one can take to reduce natural gas consumption such as: lowering thermostats at night or when no one is home; cleaning or replacing furnace filters; adding insulation to attics and walls as needed; and lowering the thermostat on water heaters to 115 degrees Fahrenheit.

2004 Income Tax forms are now available. Get a head start on your taxes by contacting the Michigan Department of Treasury at (1800) 367-6263, or online at www.michigan.gov/treasury.

Oakland County Sheriff Michael J. Bouchard's 911 Emergency Senior Cell Phone Program is established to equip seniors with a mobil phone for contacting help in the event of an emergency. The cell phones are available to any Oakland County senior citizen free of charge, with no monthly service fee, to use the phone for emergencies. For additional information, please call the Oakland County Sheriff's Community Events Hotline at (248) 975-9700.

To report a pothole on state roads contact MDOT's Pothole Hotline at (888) 296-4546.

Questions or Comments?
Contact Senator Shirley Johnson
Toll-Free at
1-877-SEN13TH (736-1384)

SenSJohnson@senate.michigan.gov

Please Note: The Johnson Letter is published monthly, for all interested readers, by the Office of State Senator Shirley Johnson. To be added or removed permanently to our mailing list, please contact our office.